

## THE ACTOR AS ACTRESS

Holly Woodlawn in *Trash* and Divine in *Multiple Maniacs*

We're dealing with something different than men getting up in drag, different than Wilder's *SOME LIKE IT HOT* with Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis playing at being women, masquerading to make a fast getaway. Different too than the cinema verite realism of Frank Simon's *THE QUEEN*, a backstage documentary of a drag queen contest. Hollywood is always ready to trivialize a titillation to turn a buck, and commercial documentarists have always sought the exotic—be that rulers, foreign landscapes, or transvestism—to reconfirm the normality of their audience. In contrast, Holly Woodlawn in *TRASH* and Divine in *MULTIPLE MANICS* are consistent camp queens, themselves defining their own presentation: the actor not as woman but as actress.

Gay film critic Richard Dyer defines camp as “a way of prying the form of something away from its content, of reveling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial.” But this kind of dissociation of the sensibility immediately brings forward questions and problems, especially when it's joined with casual excess to produce the subgenre of camp known as “trash.” Sooner or later, but inevitably, we're drawn to accept Holly Woodlawn as something more than an extended joke on sexual possibilities and to think of her seriously—not as a woman, but as a queen. She's herself, always and without excuse. A twenty-four-hour-a-day actress: the style becomes the content. Push the point further and you have Divine: gross in body, gross in deed, entering into the realm where quantitative change (excess) becomes qualitative change and suddenly bad taste is celebrated as good taste. That's confusing, and it's supposed to be. Hollywood Lawn? Holly Woodlawn. Divine what? Just Divine, darling. So any extended consideration of Holly and Divine will have to circle around a number of questions, problems, confusions, and even anxieties, before coming to rest at a decision.

### The Actress in Position

Garbo asked me: “What do I play in this scene?” Remember, she is standing there for 150 feet of film—90 of them in close-up. I said: “Have you heard of *tabula rasa*? I want your face to be a blank sheet of paper. I want the writing to be done by every member of the audience. I'd like it if you could avoid even blinking your eyes, so that you're nothing but a beautiful mask,” So, in fact there is *nothing* on her face: but everyone who has seen the film will tell you what she is thinking and feeling. And always it's something different.

--Rouben Mamoulian on the conclusion of *Queen Christina*.

Classic and contemporary Hollywood cinema uses a broad style we might call “manipulated realism” to position the actress in the narrative and in the frame as a partial metaphor, as a figure to be completed, as a Rorschach card, as a sexual object.

Using a different style that we might call “naturalism pushed to wittiness,” *Trash* gives us Joe Dallesandro. Passive in the face of everything and everyone, junkie Joe offers his hustler’s body to anyone and any use, as long as he can shoot up. He is a blank face set against the human Muzak of getting a blow job, listening to an endless monologue, stuck with a quarreling couple. Whatever others want him to be, he becomes.’

Joe is the ultimate human mask. Although positioned in the narrative and frame as woman, he is repositioned as junkie; and, therefore, he doesn’t satisfy anyone. Just as some fulfillment is promised, the film begins to create reversals as visual and sound tracks play back and forth with each other. We wait out the real time of shooting up, only to have the camera drift away, denying us Joe’s communion with heroin by substituting the everyday and trivial. While Joe takes his dissociation of sensibility in his arm, we take it in our eyes and ears.